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WHITE LABOUR IN THE TRANSVAAL.

BY

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(Late President of the Witwatersrandt Mine Employees' and Mechanics' Union).

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A matter which has not received nearly the amount of attention which its undoubted importance entitles it to is the terms upon which permission has been granted by Lord Kitchener for the restarting of a certain number of the Randt mines. The information was conveyed in a Reuter telegram from Cape Town, and appeared in the papers of the 3rd April, to the following effect:—

> The Transvaal Chamber of Mines has issued a circular stating that Lord Kitchener has granted permission for three companies, gradually increasing to seven, to restart 50 stamps each, on condition that the miners receive a maximum of five shillings a day, with rations.
>
> This condition places them on the same footing as the irregular troopers, and is intended to prevent discontent among the latter. The remainder of the miners' ordinary pay is to be deposited in a fund for the benefit of the widows and families of Randites who have been killed during the war, so that the companies will not reap any advantage in consequence of the reduced wage.
>
> The circular declares that if work is to be restarted, it is imperative for the miners to accept the position, but that the usual rate of wages will be readopted as soon as possible. The sooner the mines restart the sooner this will be done. The enlistment of all miners in the Rand Rifles is compulsory.

This question of the probable effect of the war, and the substitution of British for Boer rule in the Transvaal upon the wages of white men, may well be considered at the present juncture, in view of the "settlement" which is already—howbeit somewhat prematurely—being discussed, but which, it may be assumed, will some day be effected in that unhappy country.

Writing in the January number of "The Reformer," I ventured to express the opinion that one of the first re-

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sults of a successful termination of the war would be a considerable reduction in the wages of white workmen from the fairly liberal remuneration enjoyed by them under, and to a certain extent as a result of, the late Boer regime; a reduction which would not nearly be compensated for by any probable, or even possible, reduction in the cost of living. My prediction has been fulfilled much sooner than I anticipated. It is idle to argue that this is but a temporary expedient, and that "the usual rate of wages will be re-adopted as soon as possible." In the first place, anyone who has at all studied the question knows that it is far easier to effect a reduction in wages than to obtain an increase when once the conditions are favourable to the former process as in this case, and although I do not say, or even for a moment suppose, that five shillings per day with rations will be retained as a standard of pay after affairs have assumed a normal aspect at the Randt, the mere fact that such a rate has been accepted by the men at all will tend to make that rate rather than the previously existing one a basis of negotiations in any subsequent movement having for its object an increase in wages. This is stating no more than a self-evident proposition; at least, to those who know how readily such temporary expedients become permanent standards. It will be argued by the capitalists, plausibly enough, that all the conditions have been changed by the war; that the benefits of living under British as compared with Boer rule must be taken into consideration; that the cost of living has been reduced, etc., and that consequently there is no reason to further consider the rate of pay in vogue before the war; with the result that the workmen having obligingly pulled the chestnuts out of the fire for the capitalists, are likely to find themselves rewarded with the shells for their pains.

In the next place, we are not told—and this is a notable omission—the amount that is supposed to represent "the remainder of the miners' ordinary pay," and which "is to be deposited in a fund for the benefit of the widows and families of Randites who have been killed in the war." Who has decided, and upon what authority, what is the miners' ordinary pay, and the amount of the remainder which is to be thus disposed of? This is an important

point, and I, for one, will be greatly surprised to learn that "the remainder" is the difference between five shillings and rations and the average pay of £1 per diem which obtained before the war. It is far more probable that even now the inevitable reduction in wages has commenced, not only nominally, but actually.

Allied to the question of reduced wages is the scarcely less important one of an almost equally certain increase in the hours of labour. Before the war the eight hours day was general so far as the town mechanics were concerned, but on the mines the hours were longer, averaging at least 52 per week. And for some years past there has been a constant tendency to increase rather than to reduce the hours worked along the Reef. It is probably not generally known in this country, but is nevertheless a fact, and one worth placing upon record, that only some two months before the outbreak of hostilities the mechanics employed at the Robinson Deep Mine came out on strike against an attempt on the part of the management to increase the hours of labour from 52 to 56 per week. Upon this occasion, it is true, the men were successful, and the objectionable notice was withdrawn after a couple of days. But this was due not so much to the inherent justice of the men's case as to the fact that in view of the extraordinary political situation, and the necessity for at least a pretence of unanimity amongst the Uitlanders, it was recognised that the action of the mine authorities in precipitating a strike under the existing circumstances was fatuous in the extreme. So general was this opinion that even the "Transvaal Leader" joined in the chorus of reprobation raised against such a course of proceeding, with the result that for the time being the management climbed down. But that such an attempt should have been made, and at such a peculiarly inopportune moment for the capitalists, proves how thoroughly the intention existed, and indicates very clearly what will almost certainly happen when the fear of public opinion and the exigencies of the situation no longer act as restraining influences.

Yet another direction in which the white employees on the mines will be adversely affected under British as compared with Boer rule is by increased competition with black labour, owing to certain restrictions placed upon

native labour by the Boers being removed under the new regime. In certain articles written by Mr. J. A. Hobson in some issues of the "Daily News" of last April, it was shewn that the position of the blacks under British rule, while not being likely to improve politically, will more than probably be considerably worsened economically. This estimate must be modified in so far that a certain number of the natives will be given what has hitherto been considered exclusively white men's work to do! There would be less cause to complain about this if natives doing the same work as white men were paid the same rate of wages. But anyone conversant with the ideas and feeling prevailing in South Africa regarding the equality of blacks and whites would only smile at the bare suggestion that they should or would be paid alike. Indeed, it is safe to assert that in nine cases out of ten the "nigger" who demanded the same pay as a white man, although expected to do the same work, would be promptly kicked for his audacity, and in the tenth case would be simply told to "voetsak" (clear out). The result, then, will be either that white labour will be largely superseded by the cheaper labour of blacks, or else that the white workman will only retain his position in the skilled trades by accepting a wage at least approximating to what the native would accept if allowed to do his work. In either case the only benefit from the substitution of black for white labour will accrue to the capitalists and mine shareholders through the reduction made in the wages bill and consequent increase in dividends. Altogether, the indications point to the creation in the Transvaal in the near future of a situation which will furnish an extremely interesting exemplification, as regards both white and black workers, of the fable of King Log and King Stork.

Having now shown that the position of working men in the Transvaal will almost certainly be detrimentally affected by the substitution of British for Boer rule in that country, I purpose placing upon record some facts which will prove how extremely well, on the other hand, the working classes were treated by the late Boer Government, and the amicable relations which existed between them so long as the former approached the latter direct and in a fair and reasonable manner preferred their requests for

beneficial legislation. To assert, as was so frequently done before the war, as part of the policy of working up public feeling in this country against the Boers, that the Uitlanders, and especially the working class portion of them, were treated as mere helots, and that they were living in a state of intolerable oppression by the Boers, was not only false, but grotesquely false, since nothing could possibly have been farther from the truth. So far from that being true, it is an undoubted fact that the late Boer Government was essentially democratic in its sympathies, and that in no other country in the world have working men and their organizations possessed the same amount of influence with the powers that be as they exercised in the Transvaal. This assertion, extreme as it may seem, will, I think, be abundantly proved by the following record of the political work and legislative results accomplished by the first working men's union organized in the Transvaal—the "Witwatersrandt Mine Employees' and Mechanics' Union," more generally known throughout South Africa as the "Labour Union."

The following incident not only illustrates, and in a measure proves, my point, but is also indicative of the degree of influence with the Boer Government exerted by capitalists and working men respectively, when the interests of those two classes clashed—or were assumed to clash. When, in 1893, the Executive drafted the excellent Mining Regulations which have been in force since that year, a draft copy was sent to the Chamber of Mines, as representing the capitalists and mineowners, and one to the Labour Union, as representing the mine employees, together with a request in each case that the proposed Regulations should be considered and any alterations or amendments which suggested themselves as tending to make the Regulations more complete and effective should be forwarded to the Government, with a view to their adoption and incorporation before the measure embodying the Regulations was submitted to the Volksraad. In the result, out of twenty-three amendments suggested by the Labour Union, twenty were adopted by the Government, whilst of fourteen proposed by the Chamber of Mines, six only were accepted; and of those, two were amended when the Regulations were before the Volks-

raad, in accordance with representations made by the Union.

Earlier in the same year, the Labour Union utterly routed the Chamber of Mines over the attempt to foist its infamous Gold Thefts Bill upon the community. This legislative abortion was drafted by the Chamber of Mines, and submitted to the Volksraad in May. Had it become law, no one would have been safe from summary arrest upon suspicion of having illicit gold or amalgam in his possession; arrest not by the ordinary police, but by spies—or so-called detectives—appointed and controlled by the Chamber of Mines, but paid by the Government! It would have authorised domiciliary visits; the monstrous "trapping" system would have been introduced, and even the secrecy and sacredness of one's correspondence in the post were to be allowed to be violated by the same people. These and other almost equally monstrous proposals were, however, strenuously opposed by the Labour Union, and the audacity of the measure exposed by means of petitions and deputations to the Government; with the result that on the draft law being submitted to the Volksraad it was ignominiously thrown out instanter.

Similarly, an attempt made in 1894 by the capitalists, led by the Johannesburg Waterworks Company, to deprive tenants of their right to vote upon the question of acquiring a municipal water supply was frustrated by the energetic steps taken to protect the rights of the tenants by laying the real facts before the President and Executive Council—facts which were grossly distorted where they were not altogether suppressed by the opponents of the scheme. Unfortunately, in this case, we had our labour for our pains; for, on the scheme being submitted to the popular vote, it was rejected, with the result that the people of Johannesburg, right down to the commencement of the war, had to pay to the Waterworks Company a water rate of 15s. to 12s. 6d. per thousand gallons, and were very far from being sure of obtaining water paid for even at those extortionate rates! It is worthy of remark, en passent, that the water concession for Johannesburg is held by an essentially British company, the controlling interest being held by Messrs. Barnato Brothers.

Our next success in a legislative direction consisted in

obtaining a law making it compulsory upon engine-drivers to pass a Government examination in proof of competence, and making it illegal to employ other than certificated engine-drivers. This step was taken in consequence of the number of incompetent men placed in charge of hauling engines at the mines. Not only were white men who had never previously handled an engine-lever thus employed, but Coolies and even Kaffirs also, with the inevitable result that accidents to men employed in the mines through overwinding the cages or otherwise became more and more frequent, until the Government, at the request of the Labour Union, drafted a law upon the above lines, which was duly passed by the Volksraad, and thus an end put to the scandal, and the safety of the men better insured.

Of a somewhat similar nature was the stringent Boilers Inspection Law, which the Union was also instrumental in obtaining. Owing to the large number of defective boilers erected at the mines, many accidents occurred to men employed in their vicinity by the blowing out of plugs, the bursting of tubes, and, in more than one instance, the explosion of the boiler itself. Again the Labour Union took action, and again its efforts were crowned with success. The Government, on having its attention drawn to the matter, appointed inspectors whose duty it was to periodically inspect all boilers, and thus insure the efficient condition and proper working of them.

In 1895, also at the request of the Labour Union, the Government laid an Employers' Liability Bill before the Volksraad for consideration. This, however, came on too late in the Session to insure its passage that year; and, on subsequently ascertaining that the workmen were adequately protected in this direction under the ordinary law —a test case having been brought in the meantime and decided in the employees' favour—the Union did not further press the matter.

In matters political as well as economical, the same disposition to safeguard the interests of the workers has always been displayed by the late Boer Government. An interesting illustration of the former was the passing of a Ballot Act in 1896. Previous to that year all voting in the Transvaal had been done openly. In view of an intended extension of the franchise, which I am in a posi-

tion to assert was practically agreed upon by the Executive in 1895, and remembering the experience of the working men of Kimberley with open voting under capitalistic rule before the passing of a Ballot Act in Cape Colony in 1894, we urged upon the Government the necessity for protecting the workers in the exercise of their voting powers, when they obtained them, by combining with any proposal for an extension of the franchise a Ballot Act. The violent agitation of the year in question, however, culminating in the Raid on the last day of the year, effectively disposed of any chance of an immediate alteration in the Franchise Law. At the same time, the promise of a Ballot Act was faithfully observed by the Government. A "Bill to Provide for Election by Ballot" was drafted and submitted to the Volksraad at the ensuing Session (1896), and duly became law.

The above were the principal results of the political work accomplished by the Labour Union, but in many other cases we obtained modifications of and amendments to laws and regulations previously in existence, or in the obtaining of which we did not take the initiative, and which it would take up too much space to explain in detail. But, taking the above record as it stands of legislative measures adopted, reforms effected, and most important of all, amicable relations established between the Boers and the Uitlanders, as the results of influence exerted, and fair, reasonable agitation by a body of workmen numbering less than one thousand, and during a period of only a little over three years, and I venture to say that its parallel in the history of the world would be hard to find. It certainly should dispose once and for all of the oft-repeated calumny regarding the "oppressive treatment" of the Uitlanders by the Boers, or the equally false assertion that the Boers and their Government were quite unapproachable by the Uitlanders. As regards the latter assertion, the following interesting little incident may well be placed upon record. In 1894, having decided upon our political programme for the coming Session, we issued an invitation to each member of the two Raads to meet a deputation consisting of five members of the Labour Union, in order to discuss with us at first hand our wishes and requirements. Over fifty per cent. of the

members of both Raads accepted our invitation, the President Theatre at Pretoria was hired for the meeting, and for over three hours the Raad members listened to our statement of grievances and requirements—the secretary of the First Raad acting as interpreter—asking questions, and discussing in the most friendly and cordial manner the various questions raised by us; and with the happiest results. One cannot help wondering what would be the response to a similar invitation to the members of the Houses of Lords and Commons in this country, and especially if, as in our case, it were an invitation not from men of their own nationality, but by a body of foreigners.

That this sympathetic attitude towards the working men by the Boers was maintained right to the end is proved by the fact that on September 12, 1899—that is only one month before the outbreak of hostilities—a motion was brought in the First Raad in favour of a general eight hours' working day. After some discussion, the principle of the motion was adopted by a three to one majority. The Government was thereupon instructed to publish a draft law embodying that principle which in the ordinary course would have been considered at the next Session of the Volksraad, and had not the war supervened, it is very certain that such a measure would have become law in due course. Will the working men meet with the same degree of consideration from the coming British administration in the Transvaal? We shall see.

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